

Department of Human Services

Articles in Today's Clips Monday, August 6, 2007

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Fixing foster care

Saturday, August 04, 2007

Michigan is making orphans out of too many children. It's an unintended consequence of laws passed in the 1990s making it easier for judges to terminate parental rights.

The ambitious goal was to quickly get abused and neglected children into stable, permanent homes. The reality has been thousands of children becoming wards of the state, then languishing in foster care for years before aging out of the system. Lawmakers need to revisit, and revamp, laws that have doubled the number of orphans in the state since 1994.

Michigan had 2,972 legal orphans 13 years ago. Last year there were 6,292, not including the 536 who aged out of the system because they turned 18. The latest Kids Count in Michigan report released in July found almost 28,000 state children received foster care services in 2004. It rightly calls on lawmakers to re-examine the foster care laws.

Foster care was never meant to be a permanent situation for children taken from their parents. But each year, hundreds of youngsters who've been in the system for years, age out of foster care without ever having a permanent home.

A report by the state's Foster Care Review Board in June said the growth of state wards and increasing case loads for foster care workers might partially explain why some children have been abused or died in foster care. Gov. Granholm is seeking funds to hire more than 250 workers to find permanent homes for children in the foster care system.

While the state must be zealous in protecting children by removing them from abusive or neglectful homes, it can not be overzealous in permanently cutting parental ties, especially with older children. The sad fact is that once children reach age 11, there is little chance of them being adopted out of foster care. Three quarters of the children adopted from foster care are taken by age 10. That means options other than adoption are needed to find permanent homes for older children.

Recommendations from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which does the Kids Count study, include programs such as permanent guardianships, which allow children to maintain legal ties to their parents while being raised by someone else. Michigan ought to try such programs. They have been used with good effect in other states. Guardianship programs can provide financial assistance commensurate with adoption assistance, allowing children who can't go home to live permanently with relatives, foster parents and other adults, without being adopted by them. Another suggestion is to let judges create temporary legal guardians for foster children. That leaves open the possibility of a reunion if parents rehabilitate themselves.

Those ideas could be good options for older children, who often don't want to permanently cut ties with their parents.

Michigan already is trying the "Family to Family" approach to foster care, which aims to keep abused and neglected children with their families when it can be done safely, with relatives or at least in their home communities. Research funded by the Casey Foundation says children are less traumatized by removal from their families if they are not also removed from their schools, neighborhoods and other supports that are familiar to them.

At any given time up to 19,000 children are in foster care in Michigan. Too many of them are spending years in the system without being returned to their families or adopted. For our children's sake, the state must find better options.



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Published August 5, 2007

Teen in slaying will be tried as an adult

By HUGH LEACH

LANSING — The day before 18-year-old Chris Stragier left his foster brothers alone on April 3, he said he had taught them about guns and gun safety.

Stragier went to work at 5:30 a.m., leaving Thomas Mack, then 15, and Daniel Austin, 14, in his apartment with an assault rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun.

"I told (Mack) not to point a gun at anyone unless his life was in jeopardy," Stragier testified Monday in Ingham County District Court. "I told him a gun is not a toy. Guns are made to kill."

Police say Austin was shot and killed April 3 by Mack. Mack, now 16, will face trial as an adult on charges of first degree murder in his death.

Lansing District Judge Charles Filice on Monday sent the case against Mack to Ingham County Circuit Court.

Police say Austin was shot as he sat on a couch in the East Hillsdale Street apartment of Stragier, the son of the boys' foster parents.

Stragier said he had taken in Mack, Austin and another foster child, Brian McCann, overnight to give his parents a respite.

"My dad said it was OK, but my mother didn't approve," Stragier said.

The shotgun was loaded, he testified, with seven shells in the breech, but none in the chamber where it would be ready to fire.

The boys' foster parents, Steve and Judy Stragier of Lansing, have had all children under their care removed from the home. According to the Michigan Department of Human Services, the Stragiers' foster home license is in jeopardy.

Austin, described as a "special needs" child, could be whiny and annoying, Stragier testified. That, at times, led to disagreements between Mack and Austin, but they had never before escalated to anything more than pushing or poking.

Lansing Police Department Detective James Gill said Mack told him Austin was being whiny and annoying on April 3.

Gill said Mack told him he took the shotgun from Stragier's bedroom and brought it to the living room where Austin was sitting on the couch.

Scene described

Assistant prosecuting attorney James Pettibone said Mack told Austin about 20 times over a half hour preceding the shooting that "I'm going to hurt you."

Pettibone argued it was Mack's intent to kill Austin.

"He got the gun and racked a shell into the chamber," Pettibone said. "If the shooting was an accident, he couldn't have shot Austin better in the face than if it was intentional."

Mack told police several stories about how the shooting occurred, including that Austin had tried to take the gun from him, Pettibone said.

Lansing police Officer Kim Kranich said he found Austin sitting on a couch with his head slumped on his chest and a shotgun wound in his left cheek that exited the back right of his head.

Kranich said the shotgun, an assault rifle and several knives were lying on a futon across the room.

— *LSJ reporter Kevin Grasha contributed to this report. Hugh Leach is also a reporter for the Lansing State Journal.*

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Monday, August 06, 2007

2 troubled young lives, a felony sex case 18-year-old could face life in prison over relationship with girl, 12, who gave birth.

Tony Gonzalez / The Detroit News

ECORSE -- Days before his 13-year-old girlfriend gave birth to a daughter in October, then 17-year-old Blake Blythe doused himself in charcoal lighter fluid and lit a match.

Flames seared around his T-shirt, leaving a V-shaped burn on his chest -- a reminder of the suicide attempt.

"It's like every time he gets out of a hole, something reaches back up out of that hole and pulls him down," Patrick Blythe Jr., 22, said about his cousin, who was arrested in Mount Pleasant in May.

Now 18, Blythe is jailed on charges of first-degree criminal sexual conduct stemming from the relationship -- charges that could imprison him for life. It's the latest in a short, troubled life that family members say could help explain the relationship, which started when the girl was 12.

They were both foster children. He had bounced through at least a half-dozen homes since 1998 and had a history of mental illness. She was removed last year from a home infested with feces, rotten food and odors so strong neighbors smelled them from the street, court files indicated.

Together, they may have produced a child in a relationship tolerated by parents and opposed -- but not stopped -- by state case workers, court and juvenile records show.

Prosecutors won't say if Blythe impregnated the girl -- whom The Detroit News is not naming -- but her foster mother Gretchen Wilson, 35, of River Rouge, said he tried to provide for the child and acted like a father. Yet Wilson, and a woman who identified herself as Blythe's godsister, Joleen Clay, 21, dispute the paternity and are pressing for DNA tests.

"Everybody should be angry about the situation...but did anybody help? No," Wilson said.

"I wanted to see them make something of themselves."

Michigan's foster care system cares for more than 18,000 children, Department of Human Services data show. It's under fire for three foster child deaths ruled homicides this year; some lawmakers have complained about lax oversight and neglect. Court files indicate Blythe's state foster care workers knew he was dating the 12-year-old in June 2006 and warned him several times it was "not a good idea," but he insisted they weren't having sex.

The girl was already pregnant, records show.

Mary Chaliman, manager of the foster care program office for the Department of Human Services, would not talk about Blythe's case, citing department policy. But she said state policy allows foster care workers to decide whether to inform the police about suspected illegal acts.

"We depend on workers' judgment," Chaliman said.

Blythe's relatives decry the criminal charges, saying the girl insisted she was older. Prosecutors say that's no excuse.

"It is alleged that he had sex with an underage female. We are charged with prosecuting people who break the law, and in Michigan this is a strict liability crime," said Maria Miller, a spokeswoman for Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy.

Blythe awaits a mental health examination, and his defense attorney, Richard Glanda, said a plea agreement is possible before the start of his trial in October.

The girl and her baby returned to the custody of the 13-year-old's biological father -- after a six-year absence -- in late July.

A past of truancy, mental ill

Blythe's juvenile records show a history of truancy from Melvindale High School; he was expelled in 2004. The records also show bouts of angry threats and on-again, off-again attempts at therapy or medication to control manic depression and schizophrenia.

A 1999 psychological report describes a 10-year-old Blythe as overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for his three siblings, who struggled with lice infestations and an alcoholic, abusive stepfather, according to a separate state report. "He is a little old man," the report concludes.

The girl voiced claims of sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriends. A 2007 Wayne County Juvenile Court report said her mother -- whom the News is not naming to protect her child -- downplayed the claims, saying if it occurred, she wasn't at the Ecorse home.

"If you want to have sex, let me know. I'll get you birth control, condoms, whatever," the mother told her 12-year-old daughter, according to the report.

By the time state foster care workers took the girl from her home in May 2006, the girl's mother had confirmed her daughter's pregnancy with an in-home test, but hadn't taken her to a doctor, a Third Judicial Circuit Court petition showed.

A month later, Blythe returned to Ecorse under the care of his mother, Melissie A. Maddox.

Maddox and the girl's mother were charged with contributing to the delinquency of minors in May stemming from allegations that they allowed the two to share a bed. The mothers were sentenced to one year probation and ordered to stay away from minors without supervision.

An aunt's fears

Blythe ended his October suicide attempt by splashing into a small pool. He ended up in Havenwyck Hospital in Auburn Hills for nearly a month. He missed the birth of the girl, whom he later tried to care for by purchasing diapers, wipes and outfits, the teenage girl's foster mother said.

Blythe lived in Mount Pleasant for three months with his aunt Suzanne Mullins, 39, until his May 4 arrest. Mullins housed Blythe but avoided tough topics, like the relationship and child.

"He would sleep 12, 14 hours at least. He'd get up, he'd eat. That's part of depression. I was told not to let him sleep so much, so I would ask him to do things around the house," Mullins said.

"If he has to go to jail, I honestly don't think he'll make it." Wilson said she struggled to raise the girl, her brother and the baby, along with her own three children, without financial support from the girl's biological mother.

She did not allow Blythe in her home but said the girl snuck him in for visits. The relationship and birth left her angry, but love for the "pretty, pretty little baby" kept her dedicated, she said.

She said she'll fight to prevent the 13-year-old girl's mother from regaining custody, but relinquished guardianship to the girl's biological

father. He confirmed custody of the children. "We had our ups and downs and now that's all past us," he said.

He said his daughter will be back in school come fall.

You can reach Tony Gonzalez at (313) 222-2062 or [*tgonzalez@detnews.com*](mailto:tgonzalez@detnews.com).



Roseville foster parents receive home makeover

Donations sought

By Maryanne Kocis MacLeod
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Foster parents Kim and Steve Brown of Roseville will be the next Macomb County family to benefit from the home makeover craze.

Orchestrating the project is Paradox Church in partnership with the Roseville Family Resource Network.

"We are all trying to make our community a better place," said Craig McGlassion, Paradox pastor. "We want to thank and support a Roseville family who has taken in 15 foster children over the years. I wish we could do more; we need more families like this in our communities."

The renovation will be revealed Aug. 25 on Roseville cable television, as the City Council telecasts its meeting live from the Waldorf Street home.

Financial and material donations, along with volunteers, are still being sought.

"We won't turn anybody away," said Rodger Smith, outreach ministry director for Paradox, a new non-denominational Christian church in Roseville. "Roseville Resource Network is state-funded, and like everybody else they're seeing cuts. We want to help them continue to make a difference."

Since April 2006, the number of Macomb County children in foster care rose sharply from 945 to a record 1,243, said Angelo Nicholas, director of the Macomb County Department of Human Services.

More than 100 volunteers from Paradox and the community are already expected to participate in the makeover.

Scheduled improvements so far include new front landscaping and lawn, new driveway and cement sidewalk, interior paint for the family room and three bedrooms, a new doorwall and a custom-made entertainment center that will include cage slots for the family's two dogs and a computer work station, complete with a new computer.

"We're still hoping to get a few more things donated," Smith said. "Specifically, new carpeting, a wooden playscape or swing set for the kids, exterior paint and brick pavers for a backyard patio."

Originally, only exterior renovations were planned, but strong community response widened the project's scope, Smith said.

Besides the two foster children the Browns care for, the couple has two children of their own.

Last summer Paradox organized its first makeover for a single mother, referred by a church member, whose husband died of a heart attack 18 months earlier.

Liz Tavassol, a Roseville resident with two children, ages 22 and 15, received new front landscaping and patio, repair of a rotting shed, addition of a backyard drainage system and

small garden, backyard patio, the completion of a sunroom her husband Tony started before his death, dressing screen for his daughter, new laundry posts and laundry line, a new lawnmower and a sunroom memorial to Tony.

Sponsors included Soulliere's Landscaping and Garden Center, Atlas Cement and Masonry, Outback Steakhouse, Twomey's Landscaping, Peltz Sodding Inc. and Herbalhymes & Gatherings.

To donate or volunteer, call (586) 759-1877 or visit www.paradoxchurch.com. For more information about foster care or to become a foster parent, call the Roseville Family Resource Network at (586) 772-3604.

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http://www.macombdaily.com/stories/080607/loc_20070806003.shtml

Bay City times

People's forum

Sunday, August 05, 2007

Foster care

Voice: Kim Rowan, Reese

On July 18, a protest took place in front of the state Capitol in Lansing. This protest was started by two foster moms from Saginaw County who want other foster parents who work with DHS to understand Senate Bill 232 - privatization of the foster care program in this state.

You need to understand how this bill will affect you and foster children. We urge you to write your officials in Lansing and Gov., Granholm, whose office said she would not pass this bill, and let them know what you want. Foster parents, stand up and be counted. You have a voice and we provide a services to this state.

Keep the foster program in the hands of DHS.



Muskegon Chronicle

Drowned girl's father: 'I forgive him'

Saturday, August 04, 2007

By Lisa Medendorp

lmedendorp@muskegonchronicle.com

"I forgive him."

William Parker said Friday the drowning of his 5-year-old daughter and her 5-year-old cousin was a "terrible accident" and the man criminally charged with neglecting to supervise them should not be prosecuted.

Chillum Oudsema, 30, of 3214 MacArthur, was arraigned Friday before 60th District Judge Michael J. Nolan on two counts of felony second-degree child abuse. The other victim was Oudsema's daughter.

"I loved my baby, but it was a mistake," Parker said Friday. "Chillum loved those children more than his life."

The victims -- Oudsema's daughter, Courtney Oudsema, and her cousin Serenity Meinders -- lived at the same MacArthur Road house as Chillum Oudsema, where the drowning occurred. The girls were found in an unused pool in the backyard and may have been there for hours, authorities said. Muskegon Township police said there was more than 6 feet of murky water in the deep end.

Authorities said Oudsema had been in the basement, watching videos and sleeping at times while in charge of the children.

Serenity was the daughter of Laurie Stephens and Parker. Courtney was also the daughter of Kristina Oudsema.

Parker said it is wrong of Muskegon County Prosecutor Tony Tague to charge Oudsema with negligence.

"It makes me irate," Parker said. "It's just the prosecutor trying to win cases. It's not fair."

Parker, who lives in Muskegon and has five other children, said he is not angry with Oudsema. "I've known him for years.

"I can forgive him No. 1 because Jesus Christ is the lead of my life. And I know (Oudsema) would never hurt those children."

In court Friday, Oudsema told the judge he had no income, so a public defender will be assigned to the case. He answered questions politely, but stood with his fists clenched.

The judge set bail at \$50,000 cash or surety with the condition that if bond is posted, Oudsema have no contact with children. Oudsema also is on probation for drunken driving.

A pre-preliminary examination was set for Thursday, with preliminary examination scheduled for Aug. 16.

Tague said the girls and Stephens' 2-year-old child were left in the care of Oudsema. Stephens left for work in the morning Wednesday, and when she returned around 1:30 p.m., she couldn't find the 5-year-olds.

They were discovered in the deep end of the backyard in-ground pool that was not being used.

ClickOnDetroit.com

Man In Custody In Connection With Baby's Death

POSTED: 6:02 pm EDT July 26, 2007

UPDATED: 12:24 pm EDT August 6, 2007

DETROIT -- A 1-year-old baby died Friday afternoon.

Diamond Reynolds was rushed to an area hospital after being found unresponsive inside her Detroit home Thursday afternoon.

Detroit police said Diamond and three siblings were at home in the 5700 block of Townsend Street, with their mother's 34-year-old boyfriend, Oronda Makonnen Graham.

The child's mother told police Graham called her and said Diamond was not breathing, but it is still unclear what happened inside the house.

Diamond was hospitalized at Detroit Children's Hospital with brain damage, several broken ribs and other injuries consistent with shaken baby syndrome. She died Friday afternoon.

"Somebody had to hurt her," the child's grandmother, Debra Reynolds, said. "She had her eyes closed."

Graham left the scene, and police have not been able to find him.

Detroit police officers said they have searched the home.

Authorities from Child Protective Services have taken the three other children from the home.

Police are searching for Graham, and ask residents to be on the lookout.

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CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

A conversation with: Janet Olszewski

By Amy Lane

3:01 am, August 6, 2007

Michigan Department of Community Health Director Janet Olszewski recently spoke with *Crain's* reporter Amy Lane about health care in Michigan.

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What are the biggest issues in health care that Michigan faces? An issue for people in Michigan, just like across the country, is preventable chronic disease.

A second significant issue is coverage. We know that in Michigan too many people do not have health care coverage. We know that people who don't have coverage don't get early preventive care. If they get care at all, it's in the emergency room, in the hospital.

In addition to that, in public health, we are working extensively to ensure we are prepared for any emergency that comes our way. We have a local public health and state public health infrastructure that's stretched.

Where do things stand with Gov. Jennifer Granholm's proposed Michigan First health care plan to cover about 500,000 uninsured citizens? We're requesting a waiver from the federal government. We don't have a time line, we don't have a hard-and-fast date ... but we continue to work this. It's very important that we figure out a way to provide coverage for low-income people in this state who are uninsured. My hope is to get approval from the federal government and get it up and running ... as soon as possible.

There is currently a federal debate over the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP. What is Michigan advocating for in the SCHIP debate? We are advocating for reauthorization of SCHIP. We are advocating for sufficient funding that allows states to maintain the current caseloads and to be able to cover all the children in their state who are in the income levels within the program. We are continuing to advocate for state flexibility in how the money is used, in how we cover adults as well.

In Michigan, there's a big debate over legislation that would ban smoking in bars, restaurants and private workplaces. What is your position on that bill, and what would it achieve? I support that bill, and I'm very pleased that it was passed out of the House committee. It's a very important step for us. I think it achieves a healthier environment and ultimately, better health outcomes for Michigan citizens.

The fundamental issue here is that it's not just an individual's choice when that choice affects others around them.

dailypress.com/news/local/dp-87913sy0aug04,0,3082288.story

dailypress.com

System in the works to rate child care

The group putting the program together involves several state agencies.

[BY ANGELA FOREST](#)

247-7863

August 4, 2007

Most people are familiar with a five-star hotel or restaurant, but what are the qualities of a five-star child care center?

A rating system now being developed statewide for daycare centers and preschools might answer that question in coming years by helping Virginians become savvy consumers of these services, which range from grandmother-like home care to large-scale business chains.

"We are hoping by this fall that it will be implemented and tested in classrooms and child care facilities," said Kathy Glazer, executive director of the Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives.

Created by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine last summer, the working group involves several state agencies that touch the lives of young children, including the departments of education, health and social services.

Their mission is to coordinate resources and information that would improve early education services. The governor has also charged the group with supporting his initiative to expand quality preschool access for all 4-year-olds in Virginia, Glazer said.

Since 1998, 13 states, including North Carolina and Maryland, have created rating systems to improve the care and education of children under the age of 5.

This year, four states - California, Florida, Michigan and North Dakota - have considered legislation to develop their own rating systems.

The working group has already adopted measurement tools created by the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tools cover more than 40 different aspects of preschool/day care operations, from the use of furniture and space to personal hygiene routines, instruction, interactions with children and parental involvement.

Once the General Assembly approves funding, day care providers and preschools could choose whether to participate in the rating program. Home-based businesses would be assessed as the program evolves.

A request for about \$3 million made to the General Assembly to conduct a pilot rating system failed to receive funding during the last legislative session, Glazer said. However, state officials note the pilot is moving forward for the fall with local and private dollars.

The rating program would not only aid parents, it should benefit centers that want to improve their ratings by giving them technical and instructional support "to help them get to the next level," Glazer said.

Michelle Simpson, founder of the Inspiring Minds Youth Development Center, a preschool and after-school business in Hampton, likes the idea of a rating system to raise daycare standards. She just hopes the state offers businesses the financial and management support they need to do more for parents.

"We don't have the money for upgrades," she said. "And in Virginia, you can't charge enough to have the money to do the upgrades."

Glazer has heard similar concerns from other care providers and said officials are working out ways to ensure money is available to assist centers and preschools.

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Friend of the Court made friendlier

Monday, August 06, 2007

By Rick Wilson

The Grand Rapids Press

KENT COUNTY -- John Cole concedes it's not a glamour job, but the Kent County Friend of the Court official says he has made major improvements in an office that had a reputation for being unfriendly to clients.

Cole oversees the cases of 39,500 clients who use his office because of divorce or paternity cases to provide financial support for children.

Cole believes the office gained a bad reputation largely because of the unhappy circumstances of his clients.

"We almost have three strikes against us when people come through the door because they've gone through a divorce, one of them has had to move out, they've had to hire lawyers and they've lost a lot of their freedom to make their own choices," he said.

Cole presented his office's annual report to county officials last week. The report showed generally positive numbers for the Friend of the Court.

After Wayne County, Kent County ranks at the top in establishing paternity and in collections on back payments, second in cost effectiveness and third in establishing orders for support and visitation and total collections.

Those are state and federal measures used to gauge the success of such offices.

"We moved up (in ranking) in establishing parenthood and (court) orders after about a year, but it took longer to get the collections of arrears up," Cole said. "We only got that up about two quarters ago."

Kent County last year collected more than \$92.1 million in child support payments, said Cole, who took over the office in 2003.

While the third-place ranking in total collections may sound impressive, Cole notes the ranking is only seventh if taken as a percentage of what parents are supposed to pay.

He believes the reason is that state formula for determining payments does not adequately consider the low-income individuals who make up a substantial percentage of his clients.

"If you take a guy who's earning \$17,000 or \$18,000 a year who has five or six kids, he can easily have 50 percent of his income withheld," Cole said. "Most of our arrears are owed by poor people."

The office recorded only 186 complaints last year out of the 453,000 calls to the Friend of the Court's main number. It's on track to tag 185 complaints this year, Cole said.

County Commissioner David Morren, R-Gaines Township, noted commissioners frequently heard from constituents before Cole took over.

He and fellow Commissioner Nadine Klein, R-Grand Rapids, praised Cole's efforts.

"Under your leadership, Friend of the Court is a whole different thing," Morren told Cole.

Grand Rapids attorney Nick Missad, who has practiced family law for 19 years and chairs the family law section for the Grand Rapids Bar Association, said the office does a good job with limited resources.

"The people who work there are just bombed. They work these people to death, and they're doing the best they can," Missad said. He said the agency badly needs more evaluators and referees.

"Certainly, you want everything done today, and you want it done perfectly, but there's not a tremendous amount of resources that help them do it any faster," he said.

Press staff writer Kyla King contributed to this story

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MOUNT CLEMENS -- Accused murderer Stephen Grant likely will have no say in who adopts his two children, a Macomb Circuit judge said this morning.

Circuit Judge John Foster also ordered all parties to refrain from "badmouthing" anyone involved in the adoption battle over Grant's children, ages 6 and 4. There were eight attorneys present at today's adoption hearing, representing either Grant, his sister, the Michigan Department of Human Services, or relatives of Grant's slain wife.

Grant, who is accused of murdering and dismembering his wife, Tara, sat quietly during this morning's proceedings. Foster told Grant he would likely not be allowed to choose who adopts his children.

"Mr. Grant, you have a choice: You can voluntarily terminate your parental rights to allow an adoption -- but it will be an adoption you can't direct. If you don't, we'll hold a hearing to determine whether your parental rights should be terminated."

Grant nodded but did not answer the judge verbally.

Grant's children are living in Ohio with their maternal aunt, Alicia Standerfer, who wants to adopt them. A judge granted her temporary custody of the children after Stephen Grant was arrested in March.

But Stephen Grant's sister, Kelly Utykanski, also has filed a petition with the court to adopt the children.

Utykanski's attorney, Melinda Deel, argued that Grant still has a right to give consent to his sister adopting his children.

"The law is clear. If Mr. Grant's rights have not been terminated, then he can consent to an adoption by his sister," Deel said.

"(The Utykanskis) love and adore their niece and nephew," Deel said. "There's an important need for the children to have both sets of relatives in their lives, and (the Utykanskis) would be willing to sign an affidavit to ensure both sides of the family would get ample visitation."

But Standerfer's attorney, Michael Smith, pointed out that the law makes the children's best interests the most important consideration.

"It's not Mr. Grant who makes this decision; it's the court," Smith said. "The law says the court must first make sure the children's interests are taken care of."

Foster agreed.

"Our job is to ensure what's best for these children," Foster said. "That's why these will not be adversarial hearings. It's not in their best interests to have people badmouthing their relatives. I don't want attorneys coming in here finding fault with the other parties."

Foster ordered Standerfer and Utykanski to be interviewed by a family counselor, to determine who is best suited to adopt the children.

Another hearing on the matter is scheduled for Aug. 27.

You can reach George Hunter at (586) 468-7396 or ghunter@detnews.com.

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Muskegon Chronicle

Programs aim to keep kids from going hungry

Monday, August 06, 2007

By Teresa Taylor Williams

ttwilliams@muskegonchronicle.com

For many children, summer is a carefree time.

It brings lazy sunny days for sleeping in, watching cartoons, riding bikes and playing with friends.

For others, summer is not so carefree.

It means long days spent inside sweltering houses and apartments battling hunger pangs in the stomach.

But, thanks to a federally funded food program, children -- many of whom receive free lunches and breakfasts when school is in session -- do not have to go hungry over the summer break.

At 8 a.m. on an already warm July

day, a 7-year-old girl sat at a picnic table patiently waiting for food.

She had risen early, dressed herself and walked two blocks to Smith Ryerson Park in Muskegon.

She came to see her friends, who would make their way to the park later. But her primary motivation was hunger, and she arrived early to ensure she'd receive a free breakfast, served promptly at 9 a.m. through the Summer Feeding Program.

"There are definitely times when kids are here before I am," said Adam Andersen, park leader with the city of Muskegon's Summer Adventure program at Smith Ryerson Park. About 25 to 30 children are fed daily at the park through the partnership with the Summer Feeding Program.

"We don't have extra meals very often," Andersen said.

For nearly three decades, the free meals program has been coordinated by Muskegon Heights Public Schools' Food Service Department, which serves children at dozens of sites including parks, schools and churches throughout Muskegon County.

In assembly line fashion, food service employees prepare about 1,300 breakfasts and from 1,800 to 2,000 lunches daily during the summer to supply meals to children at 30 sites. Most of the free meal sites are in areas where at least 50 percent of the student population of a nearby elementary school qualify for free or reduced lunch.

As of June, almost 33,000 people in Muskegon County received federal food stamp assistance. Many of those people were children, according to the Muskegon County Department of Human Services.

Several site coordinators say they value the free meals provided because seeing hungry children can be heartbreaking.

Some said it's not uncommon for children to show up wearing the same unlaundered clothes, and many want seconds on the meals, which is not allowed because site leaders want to ensure there is enough for everyone.

"You wouldn't think there's hunger in Muskegon, but we do see the need. Kids ride their bikes (to the sites) and sometimes no one is at home" to prepare meals for them, said Pat Walstra, assistant superintendent and director of community education at Orchard View, which also administers a feeding program.

Roosevelt Day is a site leader at St. Joseph Park, where about 20 children eat breakfast and 50 eat lunch. He'd like to be able to give children more meals, but is limited by the guidelines.

"That's a drawback of this program because I see children here who I know for a fact are not eating at home. They have parents who would rather feed their drug habit than feed their kids," said Day. "We serve lunch at noon, and by 12:30 p.m. all the lunches are gone. I've started requested more because word is getting out. I didn't know (the need) was this bad but I've seen it firsthand."

The dates where meals are provided are coordinated with area summer school or recreation programs.

"It's all teamwork. We send the food and they set up volunteers or site coordinators," said Muskegon Heights Food Service Director Charise Johnson.

Both Muskegon Heights and Orchard View food service departments budget for the summer programs and are reimbursed by the government.

"It doesn't make us money, but we couldn't do it if we lost money. We usually break even," said Walstra. "The (program) gives kids somewhere to go in the summer, and we feed their children. It works out."

Breakfast includes bagels, donuts, and toaster pastries, while lunches consist of sandwiches and wraps. Meals typically are served with fruit, and white or chocolate milk, or juice.

Children work up a sweat and an appetite while chasing each other and climbing on playground equipment.

Brother and sister Drequon Barton, 7 and Quintaysha Riley, 10, who attend Marquette Elementary, enjoy their time at Smith Ryerson Park. Between playing games and in sprinklers, they munch on their favorites -- string cheese and juice.

DaShawn Bates, 6, who attends McLaughlin Elementary, also likes summer school, and primarily eats lunch at Moon Elementary School's program. "They feed us everyday, it's good," he said.

Orchard View participated in the Heights' program the past two years, but community education ran its own program this summer, said Walstra.

More than 120 meals were distributed daily this summer through the district's summer parks program and Cardinal Camp, a day camp.

Coordinators also offer occasional nutrition programs to help children understand the importance of eating right. A recent program called "Healthy Me Day" at Moon got kids to try vegetables as snacks; as an added benefit, a number of bicycle helmets were given away.

Walstra and Johnson both admit that operating a summer feeding program requires a lot of planning and governmental oversight. But, they say, the effort is worthwhile.

"It's a lot of paperwork, but it's definitely needed. I wish more kids participated," said Johnson.

"It is time consuming for districts who have opted to do it, but we do it because it's what's good for kids," said Walstra. "If we know for a fact that children can get a good meal that meets the nutritional guidelines and they can take advantage of that, we'd be remiss not to offer it."

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THE DAILY Reporter

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Community continues food pantry support

[Print Page](#)

By roland stoy-Staff writer

COLDWATER — Fresh broccoli, green beans, cabbage, squash, cukes, peppers, tomatoes and potatoes were all put on the menu at the Branch Area Food Pantry last Tuesday afternoon.

That's due to the Community Garden effort underway on land generously provided by the Branch Area Careers Center.

With the garden and donations, such as made last week by the Coldwater First Baptist Church (FBC), those in need are not going hungry this summer.

The FBC donated \$1,005 and a pickup truckload of food as a product of the Mission: Possible! Food Drive sponsored by the Diaconate Board in the month of June.

Russ Feller handed the check to Pat Straw, who co-manages the Deacon Al Provot Distribution Center with husband Dick, as young pantry volunteers Carlee and Trisha Gallup, 13 and 11, respectively, were on hand to witness that aspect of community giving.

Tuesday, Marie-Catherine Dube, 16, bagged green beans in the morning, and in the afternoon, Straw, Faye Lutz and Dorothea Krutsch prepared the latest offerings from the garden for distribution to clients at the center on Pierson Street.

The 133 pounds of vegetables Tuesday followed a donation Monday of five bushels of sweet corn and other items from Hoff's Farm Market on Marshall Road, just north of Coldwater.

Straw said all that was gone by the end of the afternoon.

Straw said that while there has been a great outpouring from the community in support of the garden, they still need volunteers who will help weed and tend it in community service, under the direction of master gardeners.

She also wanted to remind all others in the community that she has a place for any surplus vegetables, recalling the slogan earlier in the season, to "Plant a row for the hungry."

And in the big picture, donations and volunteers to work at the distribution center are still needed.

Straw said 400 boxes of food were distributed in July, and "more than that" come in for surplus bread items.

For more information, call (517) 279-0966.

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Muskegon Chronicle

Muskegon mother's message: 'It could happen to you'

Sunday, August 05, 2007

By Susan Harrison Wolffis

susanharrison@muskegonchronicle.com

Meet Shawna Hull.

She is 43 years old, a woman with a big laugh and even bigger worries, the kind that come with being the divorced mother of three sons and a lifetime struggling as their sole means of support.

"I tell everybody don't blink because it could be you," she says. "Blink, and you could be in my shoes, someone needing help."

Her story puts a human face to Muskegon County Department of Human Services' spiraling statistics of people on assistance.

For the past 15 years, Hull has had to supplement her income with food stamps and periodic visits to food pantries in Muskegon County when her family's cupboards were bare.

"There were times we've picked up cans just so we could put gas in the car," she said. "I don't want my kids to have to live like that."

Even though she is employed at a local retail outlet, Hull tells the story of the rising tide of Michigan's working poor -- women and men who bring home paychecks, but who are having to make choices every day between putting food on the table, gasoline in the car or clothes on their children's backs.

"Most of the support we give is to people who are working ... but not able to make ends meet," said Jane Johnson, executive director of Muskegon County Department of Human Services. "The biggest part of our job is with people who work, but whose wage structures are too low, whose hours are low and who have no medical assistance."

That's Hull's life in a nutshell.

In June, she was one of 15,489 recipients of the Department of Human Services' food-assistance program in Muskegon County. She received \$360 worth of food stamps, or \$4 per person each day, to help feed her two teenage sons, Jordan Hull, 17, and Christopher Hull, 15, still at home and herself. A third son, 21-year-old Dustin Hull, is in the Michigan National Guard and lives on his own.

The food stamps supplement the \$750 paycheck she brings home each month, working between 26 and 36 hours a week.

"There's this myth out there that people (on food assistance) are using the system, and it's just not true. So many people are being forced to make the decision of what to pay: utilities or food -- rent or gasoline," says Gail Kraft, director of Love INC of Muskegon County, a faith-based agency that helps those in need, sees people in Shawna Hull's shoes every day of the week.

Kraft calls them "casualties" of Michigan's poor economic times.

"We're seeing people who never in their lives imagined they'd need help," Kraft says.

Just getting by

In Shawna Hull's budget, there is no room for crisis; absolutely none for luxury other than her 10-year-old cat. She doesn't have a telephone. She drives a "beater" to and from work, and when there's not enough money for gas, she and her children walk or use public transportation.

Nothing about their lives is plush.

Shawna, Jordan and Christopher Hull live in a one-bedroom apartment they rent for \$300 a month near Muskegon High School. Jordan Hull sleeps in the bedroom. Christopher Hull sleeps on a couch in what normally would be the dining room. Shawna Hull sleeps on the floor.

They don't have a kitchen table or chairs because there is no room.

"I figure I should use the money to buy food and clothes for my boys, not a bed for me," she says. "It's all about providing for them ... to get them to a better place."

If that means applying for food assistance when her paycheck runs out, or turning to local food pantries, she stifles her sense of independence and pride and asks for help.

"It's not that I'm not grateful. I am," she says. "I just want people to know I'm not staying stuck (needing help) because I want to or because I'm not trying."

The majority of the people receiving food assistance in Muskegon County are in Hull's situation, says Gary Tornga, program director of Muskegon County's Department of Human Services. Most food-assistance recipients are employed, he says.

"There is a growing need for food for families who are working ... working and struggling," Tornga says. "It is a never-ending challenge to families to live within their means. Just because they're in this (food assistance) program doesn't mean they aren't trying."

High hopes in beginning

Shawna Hull's story starts in better times.

She met her ex-husband in the 1980s while both were serving in the U.S. Navy. They married, started a family, moved often as military families do. They lived on the West Coast, Hawaii, the Philippines and in the Midwest.

"It was great. I had fun, man," 21-year-old Dustin Hull said. "That's why I want to be in the military. It's all I ever knew. That's what I like."

But as the family grew in size, Shawna Hull says, so did her ex-husband's temper. He physically abused the boys. She was the regular target of verbal and emotional abuse. And it was escalating.

In 1991, fearful for her children's safety more than her own, Shawna Hull packed up the boys where they were living in the Minneapolis area and fled to Muskegon -- a town she'd never even visited before, but where a friend from her Navy days lived and offered temporary refuge.

"I moved from a place of abuse and never looked back," she said.

Only Dustin Hull is old enough to remember the family's pre-Muskegon days. The other two were too young to ask why they were suddenly uprooted from a two-income, two-parent home.

Shawna Hull decided early on not to dwell on the details of the abuse.

"I told them we moved from a negative to a positive," she said.

Still, the family always has struggled financially. Shawna Hull's ex-husband has never paid his court-ordered child support and still owes approximately \$40,000, she says. His whereabouts are unknown. His sons, who have not seen him since they fled to Muskegon, say their dad has had "plenty of time" to find them.

"I feel like if we've accomplished this much without him, we're OK. We can be proud," Jordan Hull said.

His words bring tears to his mother's eyes.

"Didn't I tell you these guys are somethin' else again?" she said.

Learning a hard lesson

Details of the past aren't the only thing she's kept from them. For much of their lives, she didn't let them know she had to turn to food pantries when their cupboards were empty. Finally two years ago, she asked her son, Dustin, to accompany her.

It was a lesson in "reality" he needed to learn.

"It was humiliating," he says. "It helps to motivate me. I want to get as far away from here as possible, socio-economically speaking."

That, too, brings tears to his mother's eyes.

"It was something I had to let him know," she says.

Shawna Hull never pictured needing to ask for help either. She never anticipated the emotional toll it might take.

"You have to become thick-skinned, even a little callous," she says.

In the "old days" when food-assistance recipients got coupons to hand to grocery store cashiers instead of the current debit card system, Shawn Hull tried to always shop in the middle of the night when no one could see her.

"It was horrible," she says. "It was embarrassing. People would stare at you ... judge you ... without knowing anything about you."

Sometimes it's a series of events "you have no control over" that gets you to the place of needing help, Shawna Hull says.

In 1996, her family's apartment in the former Hackley-Glen Apartments in Muskegon and all their belongings were damaged by a fire started next door. The Hulls had to move "and we've just never caught up."

There are budgeting and nutrition programs to help those receiving food assistance, and she's taken advantage of them, she says. But she has no money to buy a freezer for long-term storage.

"And you'd better hope the landlord's refrigerator doesn't go out on you, so you lose everything," she says.

In 2000, Shawna Hull, who always has worked, found full-time employment as an assistant clerk at Muskegon City Hall. In 2001, she was promoted, made a down payment on a new car -- and celebrated the fact "for the first time, I didn't need help." Months later, her \$12-an-hour job was eliminated during the city's budget cuts. Again, she says, she's never recovered financially.

Before finding her current job, she got part-time work at a gas station for \$5.50 an hour, but it wasn't enough to meet her bills. The car was repossessed. She had to look for cheaper housing and landed in the one-bedroom apartment she calls "crap," but her sons love because they're close to school and their friends.

"My mom always says to make the best of what you have," Jordan Hull says.

"Just cope with it," Christopher Hull says.

Shawna Hull confesses she is "overwhelmed" at her sons' responses to life.

"Children learn what they live," she insists. "You have to keep on, keeping on. Learn to cope. Learn to adapt."

"You have to have courage to do what we've done," she says. "Here's what I say: You have to be real about stuff. Don't pretend. Hold onto hope. Don't look at the crap, look at the good. That's the only way to get through."



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

State helps migrant workers bridge gaps in kids' schooling

Monday, August 06, 2007

By Rosa E. Morales

Special to the Gazette

Two-and-half-year-old Gerardo Ramirez was getting restless in his mother's arms and he wriggled his little body to the carpeted floor of the Van Buren Intermediate School District Technology Center in Lawrence.

He and his parents were in the second row of the conference room Sunday enjoying music, singing and presentations by students ranging in age from preschoolers to teenagers. Camilo Ramirez and Margarita Martinez let their son play at their feet and peek under the chairs occupied by other parents, children, friends and guests.

The young couple, originally from Mexico, arrived in Michigan a couple of months ago to work in the bountiful ``fruit belt'' of Southwest Michigan, part of the Midwest migrant stream. Speaking in Spanish, Ramirez said he is from the state of Oaxaca and Martinez is from Hidalgo, places more than 2,000 miles from the mitten state.

This is their third year working in Michigan, a state that has traditionally provided jobs for an estimated 45,000 migrant farmworkers who help boost the agribusiness sector of Michigan's stumbling economy.

The field value of Michigan's 45 crops -- from apples to zucchinis -- in 2006 was \$2.2 billion, according to state government reports. The couple may not be aware of those numbers, but they do know that each hour away from their daily weeding, hoeing and harvesting in the fields is an hour without wages.

The national average income for individual migrants is \$7,300, depending on the growing season, weather conditions and jobs available.

The Ramirez-Martinez family was among the 350 parents and children who came Sunday to celebrate the successful completion by 454 students of the six-week VBISB Summer Migrant Education Program ``Project NOMAD."

NOMAD -- Needs and Objectives for Migrant Assessment Data -- operates with a budget of approximately \$505,000 in federal and state money. That's \$121,000 less than in 2006, a cut that has meant eliminating extra activities, materials, computers and one day of operation.

Despite early morning rain and fog, many parents still put in some time working in the fields Sunday before arriving at the center in the afternoon to see and hear the essays, songs and speeches their children prepared for them under the guidance of teachers, aides and school staff. Before the program, children played outside at a carnival. Afterwards, the families shared a meal of enchiladas, beans, rice and fruit salad.

During the program, three large screens at the front of the room showed video and photos of students' work and activities in the classroom and on field trips. This year's theme, ``Catch the Dream," helped the students interpret the dreams of three civil rights leaders: the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Cesar E. Chavez.

The assignment also encouraged the students to create their own dreams for the future, a daunting task in light of the interruptions in their educations when they accompany their families across thousands of miles from Texas, Florida, South Carolina and California. Some families originally are from Mexico and Central America.

The summer migrant program offers academic and support services, such as nutrition and health care for

students from preschool to middle school who are bused to the VBISD. This year 500 students came at least once to the program, according to Tonda Boothby, a VBISD administrator who has worked almost 30 years in migrant education compiling demographic data. There were 454 students enrolled, and daily attendance averaged 300.

Boothby noted that between 30 percent and 35 percent of students are from Texas, the same percentage are from Florida, 20 percent are from Mexico and a lesser percentage are from the Carolinas, Georgia and Illinois. VBISD administrators and staff have also noted an increasing number of families from Mexico.

The numbers of these new migrants ``have been on the rise for a long time, at least 10 years" said Sarita Collins, a bilingual staff member who has worked with migrants in Van Buren County since she was 17 years old. Collins said educators first noticed their presence in the Fennville area.

Since the migrant education program began in the 1960s, it has grown into the largest of its kind in Michigan, recognized as ``exemplary" by the U.S. Department of Education in 1973, 1978 and 1985.

Yet even with outreach, recruitment, curriculum, dedicated administrators and staff and acceptance by the migrant farm worker community in the region, the students still face heavy odds against completing their educations. When kids miss days in school, they leave huge gaps in their math, reading and writing skills, educators say. When the students return to their home states, their schools may hold them back, affecting their abilities and attitudes.

In some cases, the students may be two years older than their classmates, making them more likely to drop out of school.

``We try to make every day count," Collins said, referring to what she and her colleagues call the ``gift of time."

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Families get help

New development hosts 'Holiday in July' event

GRAND BLANC TOWNSHIP

THE GRAND BLANC NEWS

Sunday, August 05, 2007

By Julia Zaher

jzaher@grandblancnews.com • 810.766.6284

GRAND BLANC TWP. - It took two cars and a handicap accessible van from Your Ride to get Michael Wills, his longtime partner, Michelle Lindberg, and their four special needs children plus two health care aides to Grand Reserve, the new 55-plus active lifestyle community on Baldwin Road. The trip was well worth it.

Residents and future residents held a "Holiday in July" party July 21, collecting and wrapping gifts for two families in need. The Wills-Lindberg family was one.

"We wrapped tons of gifts, probably 50 to 100 gifts per family," Grand Reserve lifestyle director Courtni Brewer said. "People donated gift certificates, like \$200 per family to Meijer, donated food, donated clothes. I'm literally in shock at how much we collected for the families."

Brewer contacted deacon Jack Daunt at Holy Family Catholic Church who suggested this family and another for help. That help came right on time for Wills, Lindberg and their children.

"We literally had no food left in the house and 50 cents in our pocket," Lindberg said. "It kind of reaffirms your faith in the world."

Tammy Lindberg, 18, has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. Half of her brain was destroyed by an infection when she was a toddler. Mitchell Lindberg, 13, and fraternal twins Michael and Matthew Lindberg, 10, all have severe autism. None of the children can speak and all wear diapers. Caring for them is a round-the-clock effort.

On top of that, Michelle Lindberg, 40, is losing her sight. Wills, 50, is a licensed chiropractor but a series of events caused him to close his practice. Plus, he is needed at home.

The family relies on the \$2,400 a month in state aid. But once their rent is paid (\$1,250) and utilities (\$500), there is little left over for car insurance, gas, food and other needs.

The boys, excited by all the presents, ripped into a pile of wrapped gifts that included sheets, towels, diapers, food, and clothing. They munched on cookies and pizza.

"You can see that they're happy," Wills said.

Wills and Lindberg are dedicated to their children's well-being. Wills said there is no family history of autism. He believes mercury in immunizations their children received changed them from normally developing toddlers to kids with severe autism.

Sharon Byron, 34, and her 20-month-old son, Riley, were also on the receiving end of the festive gathering. Byron is a single mother of three: Riley, daughter Halie, 10, and Michael, 14. She recently moved back to Grand Blanc from Saginaw to be closer to family and works as a waitress. But child support is intermittent and Byron needs help making it through the month.

"She keeps a great attitude," Daunt said.

Daunt says Holy Family's outreach program has seen a heavy increase in families needing help. The church gets referrals from Love, Inc. in Flint which screens applicants and makes referrals to about 130 local churches prepared to help.

Brewer decorated Grand Reserve's model home with a 5-foot tree covered in Hawaiian decorations and even created a Tiki bar. "I have the best job in the world," Brewer said. "This is better than Christmas."

As the families enjoyed the party and gifts, members of the community looked on.

Sheryl Rissel of Grand Blanc Township has a home under construction at Grand Reserve.

"Future and current homeowners are really anxious about being here and helping out the community," Rissel said.

Dolores Pielack of Hartland is also waiting for her home to be finished.

"It's just heartwarming," she said as she watched the families open gifts. "You don't realize how lucky you are."

Nearly 500 homes will be built at Grand Reserve, built by Del Webb, in the next five years. Fifty homes have been sold already and 11 are completed. Optional organized social activities are part of the package. This was the community's first volunteer effort.

"I'm going to make this a yearly event every July," Brewer said.

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Crain's Detroit Business

August 6, 2007

Comings & Goings

- **Marianne Udow**, director of the **Michigan Department of Human Services**, has been named director of the **Center for Healthcare Quality & Transformation**, a new joint venture between **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan** and the **University of Michigan Health System**.

Udow leaves the department Aug. 31 and starts her new job in September. Granholm has selected but not named Udow's replacement.

Published August 4, 2007

[From Lansing State Journal]

Take another look at MSP building

A Grand Ledge Republican wants an investigation into the state's plans to spend \$45 million over 11 years for a new State Police headquarters building on a site in downtown Lansing along the Grand River.

Rep. Rick Jones, who is minority vice chair of the House Oversight and Investigations Committee, told Gongwer News Service the project was "foolish" in light of the state's budget crisis. He believes the state will spend too much on new construction when it could fix the current State Police building, which is leased from Michigan State University for \$1 per year, for much less.

The parcel in question, sometimes called the Triangle for its shape, hardly seems the right spot for a police building featuring the bunker-style security features needed in today's world. And an office building is not the best way to keep downtown vibrant past 5 p.m. Workers and the taxes the developers will pay (unless or until the state purchases the building outright) are certainly pros for the project. But they are not enough to outweigh the negatives.

The decision to fund the building was indeed foolish, given the budget problems and the poor use of a prime location for downtown redevelopment.

Kudos to Jones for revisiting the topic.